

Can Gorbachev Stay On if Lithuania Chooses to Leave?

By BILL KELLER

MIKHAIL S. GORBACHEV has never seemed lonelier than he did last week, stumping the alienated precincts of Lithuania, pleading for the wayward republic to trust him, help him, save him, by preserving the union.

Whether his mission succeeded at all in slowing Lithuania's move toward independence will only become clear in the next few months, as separatists campaign for a majority in the republic's legislature and decide on the timing of a plebiscite on secession.

But Mr. Gorbachev's appeal to the defiant Lithuanians, lavishly recorded on Soviet television, has now raised Lithuania as a conspicuous test of Mr. Gorbachev's personal command — a test he is in no-way sure of winning.

It would be glib to treat Lithuania as just another colony bolting from the Communist bloc, another setback for the Brezhnev doctrine, after Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Rumania.

Lithuania — "whether we like it or not," as Mr. Gorbachev told an audience in Vilnius, the republic's capital — is fused to the anemic Soviet economy, its industry part of the Soviet division of labor.

Its factories, run by Soviet ministries, burn Soviet oil to run Soviet machine tools to assemble Soviet components for Soviet customers. Much of the blue-collar work force consists of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

The republic's young men serve, many reluctantly, in the Soviet military. Mr. Gorbachev probably exaggerated last week when he stressed Lithuania's role in Soviet defense — even if all three Baltic republics defected, Moscow's navy would still have access to the Baltic Sea through Leningrad and Kaliningrad — but Lithuania's defection would certainly unsettle Soviet military planners.



Tens of thousands of Lithuanians gathered in Vilnius, Lithuania, last week, the day before President Mikhail S. Gorbachev arrived, to demonstrate their support for independence from the Soviet Union.

Perilous Waters

Politically, the breakaway of a republic could be perilous for Mr. Gorbachev, in a way the upheavals in Eastern Europe were not. It would probably embolden hard-liners in the Communist Party Central Committee. (Watching Mr. Gorbachev begging Lithuania to remain Soviet, they must have thought him the most pathetic of figures, the Willy Loman of Soviet leaders.) Perhaps it would arouse the K.G.B. and military against him.

"My personal fate is linked to this choice," Mr. Gorbachev said, and he could just be right.

And yet Lithuania, more than any other Soviet republic, already has one foot out the door. Ethnically homogeneous, culturally European and heavily Catholic, it has never really been Russified.

Amazingly, in the 50 years since Stalin forcibly annexed Lithuania, no Soviet leader had visited the republic until last week. No wonder he was treated rather as

the head of a foreign power.

The Lithuanians already have alternative leadership, a robust political pluralism, a free press and an open yearning for capitalism. The nationalist movement called Sajudis, which has led the republic's carefully calculated move toward secession, reminded the country of its standing by mustering a quietly emotional pro-independence demonstration of 250,000 people on the day of Mr. Gorbachev's arrival. The Lithuanian Communist Party, faced with political irrelevance, declared its own independence from Moscow.

A year ago Lithuania might have been delighted to embrace Mr. Gorbachev's offer of a new "federation," in which Lithuania would have real autonomy while maintaining its affiliation with Moscow, but now they are

wary. The interdependence that Mr. Gorbachev emphasizes has begun to seem like a shackle. The Lithuanians feel held back by the retarded economy and sullen conservatism of Russia.

The most striking thing is the Lithuanian aloofness toward Moscow. Mr. Gorbachev, who has enormous faith in his own charismatic logic, has never come up against anything quite like it.

While the West congratulates Mr. Gorbachev for seeking a political solution to a problem his predecessors would surely have neutralized with prison sentences, the Lithuanians do not see that as a reason to reward him by remaining Soviet.

Don't you understand, he told crowds in the street, without me, you would never have been free to raise

these questions? Yes, we know that, came the calm response, but if you mean what you say about democracy, we are also entitled to answer them.

I need you to help rebuild the Soviet Union, he implored. That is not our problem, they replied. We wish you success, but we don't count on it.

In Eastern Europe, crowds hailed Mr. Gorbachev as a liberator. In the West, he is the superstar of détente, the man of the decade. Even in Siberia, where he was heckled by disgruntled consumers, Mr. Gorbachev carried the authority of the czar.

In Lithuania he encountered neither gratitude nor awe, simply the cool determination of a people who have already, in their hearts, seceded from Mr. Gorbachev's union.